

Sunday, January 13, 2019
First Sunday after the Epiphany – Baptism of Our Lord
Isaiah 43.1-7; Luke 3.15-17, 21-22
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The first Sunday after the Epiphany is always the commemoration of the Baptism of Our Lord – when Jesus went to the River Jordan to be baptized by John. While we take this event in stride, we really shouldn't. Because quite honestly, the Baptism of Jesus is actually quite scandalous.

Why do I say this? Consider what we know about the circumstances of Jesus' Baptism. We are told that John proclaimed "a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins" (Lk 3.3). So far so good. But we also believe that Jesus, as the One who is fully human and fully divine, as the Son of God, must therefore be without sin. This sets up a theological conundrum, a disconnect in our way of viewing Jesus and this particular event in his life. If baptism is for the forgiveness of sin, and if we believe that Jesus was without sin, then why was Jesus baptized? What would possess Jesus to want to be baptized? Didn't he have anything better to do that day?

While we may not particularly think of this as scandalous, perhaps we should. For it certainly was scandalous for the early Church. In light of this disconnect between the stated purpose of the Baptism John performed and the nature of Jesus, the early church wasn't really sure what to make of Jesus' Baptism. For them, this disconnect was uncomfortable, confusing, and even scandalous.

But instead of being scandalized by the fact that Jesus was baptized like we are, what if we flip it around? What about the fact that we are baptized like Jesus was? Even that is surprising, shocking, and even scandalous, if you stop to think about it. Not because of the whole forgiveness thing. But because of the real reason that Jesus chose to be baptized.

Now, to be sure, one of the major aspects or benefits of baptism is certainly forgiveness of our sins. But it is about so much more. The Catechism in the *Book of Common Prayer* has a whole section on Holy Baptism (pp. 858-9). There are six questions and answers regarding the nature and the particulars of Baptism. If you look at these, forgiveness isn't even mentioned until the third question. This question is "What is the inward and spiritual grace in Baptism?" The answer is "The inward and spiritual grace in Baptism is [1] union with Christ in his death and resurrection, [2] birth into God's family the Church, [3] forgiveness of sins, and [4] new life in the Holy Spirit." Forgiveness of sins isn't even the top response. It is third in a list of four. And in the Catechism's actual definition of Holy Baptism, we read "Holy Baptism is the sacrament by which God adopts us as his children and makes us members of Christ's Body, the Church, and inheritors of the kingdom of God." No mention of forgiveness.

What does this boil down to? First and foremost, Baptism is about relationship. Relationship with God as his children. Relationship with one another as the Body of Christ. Relationship with all creation as inheritors of God's kingdom. Given this focus on relationship, the primary reason we choose to be baptized is not to have our sins wiped away, but to be in closer, more intimate relationship with God and with Christ. And what this tells us is that forgiveness of our sins is a

result of relationship with God. Forgiveness is not a condition of relationship with God. Forgiveness is a result of God's love for us. Not a condition for receiving God's love.

So back to Jesus' own Baptism. Jesus was obviously not baptized to receive forgiveness. Jesus chose to be baptized as a sign of solidarity with us—with God's beloved children. Jesus chose to be baptized as a way to be in direct relationship with us. Jesus chose to be baptized as a sign of his relationship with us.

This is why the Baptism that Jesus instituted differs from the baptism John engaged in. Why John says "I baptize you with water," but Jesus "will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire" (Lk 3.16). John's baptism was solely for purposes of forgiveness, based on the assumption that we must first be forgiven and cleansed before we can be in relationship with God. In the act of Jesus being baptized, that way of looking at baptism and relationship with God is turned upside down.

So what is this being baptized with the Holy Spirit and fire? To be honest, Biblical scholars aren't quite sure. There's no particular context given that provides clarity on the subject. But all tend to agree that it somehow relates to the Pentecost experience forty days following Jesus' Resurrection. When the Holy Spirit came, as tongues of fire, to be an ongoing source of guidance, inspiration, and comfort to the followers of Christ. To be the ongoing presence of Christ among and within his people.

From this perspective, the Holy Spirit is the direct means of relationship with God and with Christ. That's why John talks about Jesus baptizing with the Holy Spirit. In our current understanding of Baptism, we believe that we receive the Holy Spirit as part of the process. In our own tradition, after a person is baptized, they are anointed with chrism, with holy oil, as the priest says, "you are sealed by the Holy Spirit in Baptism and marked as Christ's own for ever" (BCP, p. 308). In this one act of baptism, the Spirit of Christ, the Spirit of God, comes to dwell with us and within us. Providing the means for direct, personal, intimate relationship with God. Jesus' baptism with the Holy Spirit is the imparting of the Holy Spirit that allows and facilitates relationship.

What we believe is achieved through the sacrament of Baptism is all directly related to our ongoing relationship with God. Baptism is an outward expression of God's love for us by affirming and strengthening our identity as God's beloved children. Baptism is the means by which we are brought into and fully incorporated into God's family, the Body of Christ. As part of this family, Baptism is an expression of our commitment to God and God's commitment to us. And part of God's commitment to us is the promise of the eternal life that is merely the ongoing relationship with God in this life and forever.

A sign of our relationship is that God calls each of us by name. As the Prophet Isaiah tells us, "I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is 43.1). While these words apply to all of us, to all of God's beloved children, we see this most profoundly and vividly modeled in the Baptism of Jesus himself. "When Jesus also had been baptized and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased'" (Lk 3.21-22).

As noted in an article about the feast of the Baptism of Our Lord in the Church of Ireland's newspaper three years ago, this commemoration "is not just about Jesus. Rather, it is an acknowledgment that God is still at work in the world, and still invites us to participate in God's saving and liberating work. But, to do this, we, like Jesus, will need to be strengthened and empowered. We will need to be baptised [sic] in the Holy Spirit" (*Synthesis*, Epiphany 1, 1/13/19).

God called each of us by name in our own Baptism. He continues to call each of us by name throughout our relationship with him, throughout our lives in ministry in His name. That is why we always make such a big deal about this commemoration of the Baptism of Our Lord and of every baptismal feast day. That is why, even when we don't have Baptisms to perform on these days, we renew our own baptismal covenant. As a reminder of who we are and whose we are. As a reminder of who we are continually in relationship with. As a reminder of who we follow into this life. As a reminder of just why we do this thing called Church.

Yes, it is scandalous that Jesus chose to be baptized as we are. It is even more scandalous that we are baptized as Jesus was. But maybe, just maybe, in our broken and hurting world, we need the scandal of Baptism. Now more than ever. Because we need to be transformed by the waters of Baptism so we can more fully live into our relationship with the One who brings wholeness and healing in the world. So that we can be partners in that mission. And because we need to be reminded of who we are. We need to hear God speak to us in love, "You are my child, the beloved; with you I am well pleased."